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'I am almost the middle-class white man, aren't I?': elite women, education and occupational trajectories in late twentieth-century Britain

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a major intervention in the historiography of elites through analysis of the experience of women occupational elites born in post-war Britain. The paper draws on a new set of oral history interviews recently conducted with women born in the post-war decades with an entry in Who's Who which is the leading biographical dictionary of 'noteworthy and influential' people in the UK. The women we interviewed were all highly occupationally successful and those analysed here also attended one of twelve elite girls' schools. This article argues that our interviewees can be separated into two distinct post-war cohorts: one born between early 1940s and mid-1950s and the other born late 1950s to late 1960s. The shape and structure of the cohort's trajectories were different, their relationship to their careers were different, and, even though both groups faced sexual discrimination and unequal divisions of labour, the nature of these gendered inequalities changed too. By foregrounding elite women within this shifting historical context, this article illuminates broader trends in both classed and gendered experience and how this related to the changing nature of the economy in recent history.

KEYWORDS

Elites; girls' schools; women; oxbridge; oral history

Introduction

Women are rarely centred in the standard works of elite historiography from the twentieth century.[1] This is despite the fact that, as we shall see, the period since 1945 has witnessed a huge rise in women participating in the public elite and occupying positions that had previously been almost totally dominated by men. In addition, these standard works tend to examine wealth and social structures over long sweeps of time but rarely give voice to individual experiences. This paper makes a major intervention in the historiography of elites by attending to both of these gaps through analysing the experience of women occupational elites born in post-war Britain.

Sociology has recently returned to the study of elites, prompted by rising inequality during the end of the twentieth century. This research agenda seeks to complement work

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on social mobility and the working class by examining mechanisms of closure within the elite itself. This return to elites has not yet occurred in the historiography. The approach taken here is influenced by the work of sociologists, such as Mike Savage, who suggests that scholars direct their attention towards how 'the advantaged classes secure their advantages'. This reorientation therefore 'directs analytical attention to the strategies and activities of the advantaged class themselves and exposes these to critical attention'.[2] Even within this new sociological study of elites, women have remained on the margins.[3] There are notable exceptions, of course. Luna Glucksberg has done excellent work rethinking elites using the lenses of class and gender, most notably arguing that women in contemporary Britain perform invisible labour on the 'home front' which is essential for reproducing the family as elite (and bolstering men's wealth).[4] However, she does not analyse elite women who were occupationally successful and who held prestigious roles in the public sphere.[5] The historian Helen McCarthy has recently used the British Diplomatic Service as a case study for understanding women's experience in an elite profession over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—although she did not consider them as an 'elite class'.[6] She found that until at least the 1970s, heteronormative ideals and policies kept women out of the higher levels of the service and particularly discriminated against married women.

There is not an agreed and universal definition of who counts as an 'elite' and as a result studies typically use varying definitions. However, most agree that elites are those with disproportionate access to, and control over, a range of economic, social, cultural, and political resources. We operationalise this approach by drawing on *Who's Who*, the leading biographical dictionary of 'noteworthy and influential' people in the UK. We base our analyses on the historical database, which has been published in its current form every year since 1897. *Who's Who* is helpful here because it combines a positional and reputational elite. Around 50% of entrants are included automatically upon reaching a prominent occupational position. These positions span multiple professional fields. For example, Members of Parliament, judges, ambassadors, FTSE100 CEOs, and Fellows of the British Academy are all included by virtue of their office. Importantly, *Who's Who* has used largely stable criteria for professional inclusion since the late nineteenth century. The other 50% of entrants are selected each year by a board of long-standing advisors, who make reputational assessments based on a person's perceived impact on British society, and people who are recognised to possess the kinds resources mentioned to above. It is important to note that occupational success is significant for those who enter via both routes. Only c.5% of people currently in *Who's Who* are included solely due to titles or patronages—and almost none of them are women.[7]

Using this database ensures that the central focus is on the women breaking through into a public elite and entering prestigious positions for the first time. In the UK, for example, only 1.91% of entrants to *Who Who's* born in the 1850s were women. Among those born in the 1960s, in contrast, this figure had risen to 25.14% (and has increased to 30.69% for women born in the late 1970s).[8] Notably, this rise is driven by women's rising visibility in the professional workplace across the twentieth century, and therefore means that an increasingly significant way for women to establish elite status was through occupational success. The rise of women working, and particularly married women working, is one of the meta-narratives of post-war British history—hence the importance of focusing on occupationally successful women.[9] The value of this definition is that it

provides a stable conceptualisation of 'elites' that can illuminate particular forms of historical change, especially those that are especially relevant to women during the post-war period.

Between spring 2021 and spring 2022, 40 women born between the 1940s and 1970s with an entry in *Who's Who* were interviewed as part of a wider project on elites. Some of these women came from elite origins and others experienced social mobility. 10% of the women in the sample are non-white and they are primarily of South Asian origin (some of these women were born abroad and some in the UK). These women were all highly occupationally successful: their careers range from QCs; to permanent secretaries in the civil service; to CEOs (A table of their birthdates and primary profession can be found below). A life history approach was taken in the interviews, beginning with childhood, and following their trajectory through to present day.[10] Oral history as a method aligns well with our approach to elites because it allows a rich analysis of how elites secured particular advantages, illuminating the mechanisms and the practices that underpin their access to power and privilege. All of the women were interviewed online as a result of the coronavirus pandemic rendering in-person interviewing extremely difficult. The interviewer was initially cautious about online oral history interviewing and concerned that it would disrupt the sense of rapport that is possible to build with an interviewee when you meet them in their home. In fact, there were significant benefits to online interviewing. Women often seemed more at ease because the anxiety of having someone enter their space was reduced and the distance of the screen encouraged them to open-up more at times.[11] It is also a particularly useful practice when interviewing younger women (who tend to be harder to recruit to oral history studies) who are still in the workforce and who might be able to spare 90 minutes to speak during the workday if they can be interviewed online but not to receive someone into their home. This is especially true of highly successful women at the peak of their careers.

The open-ended life history interviews of 21 of the women are analysed in this piece. These 21 have been chosen because they attended 1 of 12 highly elite girls' schools: St Paul's Girls' School; Wycombe Abbey; North London Collegiate School; Clifton High School for Girls; Roedean; Cheltenham Ladies' College; Queen's College Harley Street; Oxford High School for Girls; Benenden; St Leonard's; King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham; Godolphin & Latymer Girls' School. The majority of these schools are based in the south of England, and one is in Scotland. We focus on these schools because they have historically been the places which provided women with an academically excellent education and which gave young women the greatest chance of entering the public elite in part because of their links with elite universities.[12] In short, this set of schools (which we have described and justified in earlier work) functioned for girls—albeit not quite as powerfully—much like the Clarendon schools did for boys.[13] These schools are not typical but we focus on these extreme cases in order to identify a set of women who likely had the smoothest trajectories into the elite of all women born in this post-war period. This is not to say that these women's trajectories were smooth (far from it) but the problems and obstacles faced by these women would likely be magnified for women from less privileged backgrounds. This amplifies gender as the lens of analysis.

This article argues that our interviewees can be separated into two distinct post-war cohorts with differing experiences of elite education and reaching a high occupational level. The older cohort: born between early 1940s and early 1950s were more explicitly post-war

women with historians terming them the 'transition' or 'welfare state' generation.[14] They were pioneering educationally and occupationally and were the progenitors of second wave feminism. Yet, they operated under fairly rigid gender norms and established their careers within a difficult policy context. We know far less historiographically about the experience of the younger cohort—born late 1950s to late 1960s—at any position of the class stratum. Savage et al. have suggested that women born in the late 1950s 'straddle crucial social changes'—children and young adults in the turbulent 1960s and 70s, and then starting their careers under Margaret Thatcher's 'radical market Tory government'.[15] This younger cohort not only had more opportunities than their older counterparts to enter elite occupations as defined by *Who's Who*, but the shape and structure of their trajectories were different, their relationship to their careers were different, and, even though both groups faced sexual discrimination and unequal divisions of labour, the nature of these gendered inequalities changed too. By foregrounding elite women within this shifting historical context, this article illuminates broader trends in both classed and gendered experience and how this related to the changing nature of the economy in recent history.

Education and partners

The women did not view themselves as hailing from 'elite' backgrounds, instead often categorising their childhoods as some strata of the middle class or by the class that they were *not*. Class was not necessarily an easy topic of discussion, and it was rarely raised spontaneously by the interviewees. Elise (b.1942)-whose father was an aristocrat—epitomised this when she stated: 'I don't think of myself as a class, but I'm clearly not working class or lower class. And I, you know, I don't particularly want to think about class, but I must have come from privileged background'.[16] Alexandra's (b.1945) parents were both academics at Oxbridge and she described her background as 'the intelligentsia, which is definitely not upper class or public school or anything like that' (despite the fact her brother boarded at a top public school).[17] Of all the interviewees, Rebecca (b.1954), was one of the few women to spontaneously raise her own social class. This was owing to the fact she had experienced quite rapid social mobility during childhood as a result of her father's sudden business success, and she thus felt uncomfortable at her elite school. She described her early life as 'not a rags to riches story, but it's a story about class, about shifting class'.[18] There were not many women in the sample who attended one of the elite schools from straightforwardly working-class childhoods but they often noted the social mobility their own parents had achieved, even if that mobility was what might be called short-range mobility. Karen (b.1959) stated that 'my father was as working class as you can get, and my mum was the opposite. And we grew up middle class, we went to a middle-class school'.[19]

The interviewees conveyed a sense that these 'middle-class' schools that they were sent to were regarded as 'good' schools in the post-war period and that this was a piece of information their parents largely possessed. This could be because their parents were a part of upper middle-class circles or, interestingly, because they worked in education themselves in some form. Sarah's (b.1963) mother was a classics teacher and 'so was very plugged into what was going on in the educational world, they basically, for all of us, looked at what was the best school'.[20] For the earlier generation of women this knowledge could be used to circumvent the divisions of the tripartite system. Janet (b.1948)

narrowly failed the 11+ exam and was offered a place at a local school that her parents—both academics—did not see as very good quality, and so they paid for her to attend the prestigious local private school.[21] Elise simply stated that her parents sent her to one of these elite schools because it was 'very good school' and 'they were aiming high for me'.[22] Fiona (b.1960) described this same school as 'if not the best school in the country, one of the best' and she was sent there despite it being quite far away from where they lived.[23] There was often differentiation between siblings, primarily between male and female siblings, but occasionally amongst sisters too. Fiona's sisters were not sent to the same school as her because her sisters were not considered as academically able as she was by their parents.

One of the big divisions between male and female elite education was that between boarding and day schools. Boarding was thought of as much more appropriate and valuable for boys by the upper middle-classes during the twentieth century. Where the women in the sample were boarders it was often because of the international and even imperial nature of their father's career and thus the need to ensure the children had a 'British education'.[24] Born in 1957, Judith spent her early childhood in Calcutta, then later the family moved to Rangoon (in Myanmar) where she began school. She described her family as a 'colonial family' and said that 'colonial life was very nice' and that it was a 'shock' for her mother when they returned to the UK and she had to do her own cooking.[25] Judith was sent to an elite girls' boarding school in the South of England, although her brother had been sent even earlier to board at a prep school when he was just 6 years old and Judith felt her parents had taken his education more seriously. Caroline (b.1956) spent her early life in South Africa after her family moved there for her father's work as a priest. Caroline's experience of attending a 'white school, whites only' during 'the height of the apartheid era' left an enduring impression on her and contributed to her decision to become a journalist.[26] After primary school, she was sent to an English boarding school until she was 16 and then switched to a prestigious day school, where she was much happier. From a different perspective, Andrea (b.1957) spent some of her childhood in India because her father was from a high-status Indian family. But she was primarily educated in Britain: 'Daddy decided that I would be tootling off to boarding school . . . he decided that the best start he could give both myself and my brother was to send us to the top boarding schools in the country'.[27]

The elite girls' schools (and the elite universities these schools helped them access) played a profound role in shaping the trajectories of the women sampled from *Who's Who*. But the role they played was both ambiguous and changing. In particular, the messages these elite girls' schools transmitted to their students about higher education and careers changed subtly over time. Academic success was always important for these schools, particularly in the form of attending Oxford or Cambridge. Attending one of these two institutions was in fact even more prized earlier in the period because they were perceived as the only universities worth matriculating at for the daughters of elite families.[28] Sally's (b.1952) headmistress actively engineered her applications so that she would be rejected from non-elite universities so that Sally would be forced to stay on and try for Oxbridge entry.[29] While some of the young women born in the 1940s and early 1950s (like Sally) were destined for a good university, others were simply being trained to be good wives and mothers with some further education training as a bulwark. Patricia (b.1946) was the daughter of an academic and was sent to the prestigious high school in

the university city where her father—who has an entry in *Who's Who*—was a professor. She recalled:

> I came across not so long ago the programme for the leavers event, and what was surprising was a relatively small number of us had stayed onto the sixth form, and a relatively small number of those were going on to university . . . now you take it for granted that the sixth form of an academically oriented school, everybody's going to university. [Back then] not at all. And I do remember being told in careers advice talks in the sixth form, that if you trained as a teacher or secretary, you could always find work wherever your husband's job went. Which was sound advice (laughter)![30]

Victoria (b.1949) was one of the girls at an elite school who found herself being discouraged from attending university.[31] She was told by the teachers that she was 'not university material'. When we asked her what it seemed like 'university material' was she responded: 'the good girls. The happy ones. You see, I wasn't any good at sports either'.[32] This concept of 'university material' is potentially coded class language as Victoria, although not working class, was from a less elite background than many of the students at the boarding school she attended. After finishing her A-Levels, Victoria decided to apply for university under her own steam, and supported by her parents, she took tutoring classes for the Oxford and Cambridge entrance exams and received offers of a place to both universities.

This rhetoric changed for female students born from the mid-1950s onwards. There was a growing recognition that *all* students should be going onto university and even have their own careers, and this upped the ante and the competitiveness of these spaces even further. The phrase 'hothouse' starts to be introduced into the discussion of these schools by the interviewees—particularly by those who attended the cluster of London-based schools. Sarah described her school as a 'hothouse' (that she thinks has only intensified since she was there).[33] She was clear that 'there was very much an expectation that people would go to [a Russell Group] university . . . and that people would go on and have careers . . . I mean, lawyers to some extent, law and medicine were very much the things that people want to do'.[34] Alison (b.1964) was the most explicit about the pressure that female students felt at the time. She vividly stated that: 'a third of my year were anorexic, a third of the year went to Oxbridge, a third of the year ended up in therapy, and I think that third probably overlap considerably. It was, we were taught to be, well, I think it was a, a hothouse'.[35] She stated that she and some of her classmates saw themselves as 'survivors of that system'.[36] Fiona echoed this sentiment when she explained she still had friends from her schooldays because 'we were all traumatised together'.[37] Fiona recalled that some girls did go to Russell Group universities but it was still a little 'embarrassing' to do so. Alison suggested that by the time she attended an elite school in the 1970s they 'never talked about *anything* about balancing being a woman and maybe wanting to have a family or anything. It was almost seen as like, if you wanted to do something, you just wouldn't say that that was something you wanted'.[38] The younger cohort attended the schools during and just after second wave feminism, and we see the influence here of less gendered messaging to young women which prioritised their ambitions a little more —although, the pressure manifested itself physically. Indeed, Alison is also drawing attention to the start of a historical moment where gender was obscured and the rise of neoliberalism led to a kind of disembodied individualistic citizen who needed to

negotiate balancing a personal life privately. This could be considered the beginnings of the idea of 'having it all' which came to be highly significant later in these younger women's careers. This concept of 'having it all' was that you could be a wife and mother, with a highly successful career, and that your home life did not have to interfere in your career trajectory.

Even though the interviewees attended all girls' schools for secondary education, we start to see women from the younger cohort being allowed into male elite educational spaces. For women born in the immediate post-war period who attended Oxbridge they could only gain a place at one of the small number of women's colleges. It was highly competitive to obtain one of these places but, as Janet Howarth has shown, the women's colleges were persistently 'in but not of' the university.[39] In the early 1970s, however, a wave of Oxbridge colleges started to go mixed, and although this was quite a 'restrictive experiment' initially, it still represented a significant change to women's experience.[40] It was an important psychological and material shift that women students could now go to 'daddy's college'.[41] Even if you were not literally following 'daddy's' lineage it was striking that women had more of the same choices that their elite male peers and ancestors had enjoyed. Melanie (b.1960) started Oxbridge the first year her college admitted women students. She was not inspired by her father's experience to choose that college, but she had been influenced by the father of one of her friends at school who was a Don at the college and had chosen it despite concerns from her teachers about applying to one of the prestigious male colleges. Melanie explained that out of the c.550 students in the college there were 23 female students admitted that year, and there 'weren't really any female members of staff, there was the librarian ... it was a very, very male environment'.[42] Fiona also started university just as her chosen college had gone mixed. She recalled that it 'definitely wasn't a 100% popular move. For a start, my husband, who was the year above, was devastated, because he had moved deliberately to go to a boys' college'.[43] Abigail (b.1967) did not apply for Oxbridge because she wanted to study in a more cosmopolitan city, but she made the decision to leave her girls' school for sixth form to attend one of the Clarendon schools that had recently started admitting female students on a limited basis. Her rationale for this move summed up the significance of women having increased access to elite male institutions: 'being at a girls' school didn't suit me at all, like I (long pause), I wanted to be around the gender who I knew that I would be working with, competing with, interacting with kind of during my future life'.[44]

Higher education was a defining moment for women in many ways in part because it was in these spaces that they would meet the men who would become their husbands. This is especially true for the older cohort of women. Strikingly, of the Oxford women who did marry, 60% of them married an Oxford spouse during the 1960s.[45] This could be between fellow students (e.g. Patricia—see below), or sometimes the male partner would already be in the early stages of their lecturing career at Oxbridge. Janet met her future husband whilst she was undertaking graduate study and he was a lecturer in economics.[46] In Alexandra's case her husband was the tutor on her graduate course even though he was only a little older than her. She describes him as the 'greatest influence' on her approach to her subsequent career.[47] That is not to say that women in the younger cohort did not meet their life-partners at university, but it was less common due to the rising age of marriage from the 1970s onwards. Melanie met her first husband at Oxbridge, and he was very formative in the decisions she made about her career path. Her dream was to

become either an actress or a journalist, but her boyfriend did not approve of the former, and her father was against the latter. She explained that 'the two men in my life . . . really influenced what I ended up doing', which was to apply for merchant banking alongside her husband so they could be together in London. Ironically however, Melanie was much more successful in her job applications than her husband to be: 'I had all these offers and he didn't have any' and this caused some 'tension' between them.[48] She downplayed her success by stating that it was simply because she was 'one of the first girls at my college you know, and that spills over into the City thinking they ought to be getting girls in'.[49]

Meeting a husband who was also on an elite trajectory could impact women's careers in different ways. For those born in the 1940s and early 1950s it could be disruptive because they married so early. After school, Patricia gained a place at a women's college in Oxbridge and stayed on for graduate study. During her doctoral work she met her future husband who was also a DPhil student. Both wanted academic careers but he was offered a lectureship in Scotland and so they uprooted their lives to pursue that opportunity. This reflected a pattern throughout their relationship that his career was seen as the priority. Patricia stated: 'it was always about [husband's] career rather than mine because, partly, I just assumed he was cleverer than I was. Which is what one tends to think, and he is very clever, it has to be said'.[50] If her career was slowed down or interrupted because of these moves for his career, she actually blamed herself: 'I really don't remember thinking of it in terms of I am subordinating my career to my husbands. I remember thinking I should somehow have managed this better, but I couldn't think quite how'. Eventually, she did. While both have had successful careers, it is only Patricia that is a Fellow of the British Academy and who has an entry in *Who's Who*. Meeting their partner a few years after beginning their career was more the norm for women born in the later 1950s and 1960s. Laura (b.1961) was set up with her husband through friends and they married when she was in her late twenties. Her husband worked in a 'parallel bank' in 'the City' and she said that this was good for their relationship because 'it helped having somebody on the same wavelength who understood those pressures'.[51]

The role of the partner comes through very clearly among the women in *Who's Who*. Women in general are more likely to have a partner who is also a member of *Who's Who* than men, and it is women from elite schools that are the most likely to have a partner that is also in *Who's Who*. Women who attended Oxbridge are more likely to have a partner that is also in *Who's Who*. This connection seems to be particularly prominent for the women that were born in the 1940s and the 1950s, one of the first generations of women who did not have to grapple with the Marriage Bar in many public sector jobs.[52] For this cohort, a remarkable 25% of women in *Who's Who* who had attended an elite girls school also had a partner in *Who's Who*.[53] This should not be conceptualised as a form of marital mobility for the women. They were, in many cases, from very privileged backgrounds. Indeed, some of the women discuss the less privileged origins of their husbands (who often fulfilled the trope of the grammar school boy).[54] What the relationships with occupationally successful men offer to these women, especially those born in the immediate post-war period is twofold. Firstly, it provides them with a direct mentorship (often with someone whose career has been smoother) or the opportunity to continuously have somebody to test out ideas with and have interesting conversations (with men benefitting from this back and forth too). Alexandra had this mentorship-type relationship, and similarly Sally's husband was the reader and critic of her fiction writing.

Secondly, what these marriages meant is that when women born in the 1940s or early 1950s stepped back from the labour market to have children, they were able to stay in the orbit of the elite (materially and socially) and re-enter employment with more ease than working- or middle-class women. There are some affinities here with the 'tiny minority' of 'dual career couples' that the Rappoports' identified as emerging in the late 1960s.[55] However, with elite couples it is not only that the husband is supportive of a wife's career but also that there are tangible and intangible resources that women can draw on to build their career.

Employment trajectories

Historians have shown that women born in the long 1940s were more likely to have changeable lives with interrupted trajectories than their male peers and these interviews show this is also the case when compared with women in the younger cohort. Our interviewees, as alluded to above, reveal that these trajectories were common among women with elite careers too.[56] This is partly manifest in the longer career entries among women in *Who's Who* born in the 1940s, denoting the larger number of positions they had occupied in their careers to that point. Celia (b.1946), for example, gave up her permanent academic job in London in the 1980s to move to Cambridge with her husband for his job and had a child. She emphasised that this was a 'big decision . . . [it was] strange because having had a job I was suddenly a don's wife'.[57] She struggled with this change but eventually began to establish a new career as a writer during the 1990s which was in part possible because even outside the labour market she had retained markers of elite status, such has continued access to literary networks.

Despite their incredible accomplishments, some of the women in the older cohort demurred about considering their employment as a career per se or expressed some ambivalence about that language. For example, Celia who, when reflecting on her working life in our interview, expressed discomfort with the term 'career': I didn't really have a sense of career and I remember when I was living in London and a friend of mine a poet came to dinner . . . And she said, well, your career or something. And I thought my career, do I have a career, what's a career?'[58] Similarly Alexandra questioned the idea of using that terminology to describe her employment trajectory. She stated: 'It's certainly not what I would call it a . . . . I've never thought of myself as having a career actually. I mean, I do, you know, obviously I did have one, but I never thought "what shall my career be". The word "career" was not one I ever used'.[59] This was not universally the case for all the interviewees but the fact that some of the most occupationally high-achieving women felt unsure about using the term illustrates that from an early age there was ambiguity about whether these women would prioritise paid employment across the life course.

The real heights of the women's careers in the older cohort came much later in life. Children were often a part of this interrupted trajectory. Victoria left her PhD due to her supervisor's plagiarism of her work and decided to start a family.[60] It was logical' that she would be the 'carer' for their children, she said, and although she tried to keep her research projects going on the side they did not really go anywhere.[61] She found herself a 'frustrated, very lonely housewife for about 10 years' but a chance encounter led her to decide to retrain at an evening adult education class in a very niche artistic pursuit. Eventually, she became one of the top people in that niche area in the country, and even

internationally. It was not until her fifties and into her sixties that she began to win prizes and received honours for her contribution to the field. For Elise, recognition in her field also came very late in life even though she (unlike Victoria) had been in the same profession since she finished her doctoral work.[62] She worked part time for much of her career on insecure, low status contracts and barely had time off when she did have children, all while producing pioneering research. She was 'dependent' on her husband for money because he had a permanent full-time role at Oxbridge.[63] Elise was not made a professor until the latter stages of her career. Women in the older cohort married earlier and tended to have career success much later in life.

This was coupled with broader shifts in the occupational profile of women across these two cohorts. But occupational shifts were partly contingent on whether these women attended one of these elite schools or not. Women who attended top girls' schools post-1940 were less likely than their counterparts from non-elite schools to work in the field of education—although notably prior to 1940 they were more likely *as a percentage* to be working in education. Around 40% of women from elite schools born 1960–1979 (calculated together due to low sample size) were employed in the cultural sector. In comparison, women who had not attended the top schools and were born in these decades had a particular strength in politics. Law increased rapidly over time while education declined in importance.[64]

In other words, women did not operate in the same labour market across the period, and there were changes to the economy that affected the opportunities available to women in young adulthood. For women born in the 1940s and early 1950s, they graduated from university into an economy that still had a vibrant and growing public sector.[65] Education had been a key employer for women since the nineteenth century.[66] It was certainly a career that even elite schools thought would be suitable for women in the immediate post-war decades. This path was prevalent amongst women interviewees in the earlier cohort and there tended to be a strong lineage of education within their families. Once at a prestigious university, graduate study at doctoral level was often presented as the natural next step. Both Janet and Celia had academic lineage and they were encouraged to undertake doctoral work even if they were not convinced that they wanted to stay in academia.[67] Sally wanted to be a writer and pursued this early in her trajectory unlike Celia, although she did train as a teacher so that she could earn a living whilst trying to navigate the difficult world of publishing.[68] Georgina (b.1943) almost became a teacher and completed her PGCE at Oxbridge.[69] However, a chance encounter that occurred whilst she was giving an impressive farewell speech as JCR chairmen led to a single cursory interview and then a job in publishing.[70] This set her career on a completely different trajectory, eventually ending up in business. Generally, careers that required qualifications and clear pathways were preferred by women in the mid-century. Outside of education for example, Alexandra became an architect, and Penelope (b.1953) a vet.[71]

The 'financialisation' of the economy during the 1980s created a different type of opportunity for women with elite education. This shift was also partly prompted by equalities legislation enacted during the 1970s, which slowly but steadily raised concerns about the lack of women in top jobs such as the law, the media, and the upper echelons of business.[72] This was a difficult period in the public sector, but certain areas of the private sector were flourishing and they needed prestigious graduates, and women found

opportunities here instead. Linda McDowell's findings in *Capital Culture* support this classed assessment, with one of her interviewees—a recruiter—stating: 'we started to take more girls from Oxbridge in the mid-1980s expansion, or we would have had to look at men from the polytechnics'.[73] Laura had gone straight from her Russell Group university into a role in the 'male bastion'[74] of the City in one of the institutions that was taking more women during the 1980s. She explained that she decided on that career because it was 'desirable' amongst her cohort of friends.[75] The type of careers that women in the younger cohort entered were more likely to offer the opportunity to accumulate individual wealth such as in the City or in law. Law, especially as a barrister, was frequently recommended to women in the younger cohort as a possible career by the elite schools in a way it was not to the older cohort. The number of practising women barristers rose from 7% in the 1970s to 14% by 1987 and the Association of Women Barristers was founded in 1991.[76] It is hard to find ways to measure women's wealth in recent history, but it is notable that the ex-principal of Oxbridge women's college stated that when they were aiming to raise large donations from alumni they targeted women born after the 1950s as they were more likely to have their own wealth.[77] The 1980s was a key turning point for understanding the opportunities for advancement for women into elite careers. This contrasts with the findings of other research on the 1958 birth cohort study which argue that women born in the late 1950s had a difficult time on entry to the labour market. [78] Financialisation, then, may have specifically provided women *elite* opportunities in the private sector.

The changing economy and the increasing presence of women in the public elite made it even more possible for women to follow in the occupational footsteps of their fathers. Fathers' careers loomed large in the post-war stories of women's interviews, and some were able to follow them into academia. But, just as they were more able to attend 'daddy's college', the younger cohort had even more opportunity to follow their father's lineage. Laura's dad had been in finance (which is where she ended up), Mieke's (b.1966) dad had been a broadcaster and this is where he helped her get her start, whilst Fiona was inspired by her late dad's career in law. When Sarah finished her maths degree at Oxbridge in the mid-1980s, she was thinking of consultancy or finance but was persuaded to join the civil service because her father had had an illustrious career there. She applied when it was becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of women in the science and technical grades, and in the higher grades.[79] The civil service created a 'sort of side shoot of the fast stream called administration trainee (accountant)'.[80] The indirect effects of financialisation are evident in the creation of the scheme: it was created in the late 1980s because there was a concern about the lack of proper expertise within the civil service about 'finance'. The scheme was not very popular, so when she put it down as an option, Sarah 'discovered that [her] bargaining position was quite good'.[81] She took advice from her father and an expert that he knew in the Home Office who helped Sarah leverage her position.

It tends to be beneficial for women when areas of an elite occupation are growing or changing, and this echoes arguments about social mobility where working-class people only get into elite positions when there is more 'room at the top'. This can lead to new institutions or new areas where women can find their niche and establish themselves as an expert in that field. We see this across the cohorts in different ways. Older women described creating new fields of enquiry. For Celia and Janet, who both

attended Oxbridge for undergraduate and postgraduate study, this meant bringing together two subjects in an innovative way. In her doctorate for example, Celia used the in vogue post-war subject of psychoanalysis as her frame of analysis for ancient history.[82] Her dad had retrained as a psychiatrist and so it had been in the 'milieu' she had grown up in. She explained that 'nobody else was doing it and they all thought I was bonkers'.[83] Janet was one of the very few women studying philosophy and classics during the mid-1960s, and she described her degree experience as 'always a battle'.[84] Early in her career, she made original interventions by bringing the lens of feminist philosophy to classics, which also helped her secure a prestigious fellowship. For Elise, her innovation came a little bit later in her career after she had children and was still moving from short-term position to short-term position in medical research.[85] A discussion at a conference in India led her to move into and develop a new field relating to maternal and child health. She started producing 'pioneering work' that has had a big impact in the medical world and on policymaking. Eventually, this trailblazing work secured her a professorship.

Some women in the younger cohort found a niche by realising early the radical potential of technology in different fields. During her time at a prestigious art college in London during the 1980s, Alison got the opportunity to do a three-month exchange with an elite art college in America.[86] While visiting a very affluent friend who happened to have an early Macintosh computer in his house, she started using it to create art: 'it was amazing and that was the beginning of the rest of my life. Basically, it changed *everything*'.[87] She quickly became one of the early pioneers of creating art using computers. She also leveraged what she called her 'women in technology shtick' to gain funding. It is notable that although her approach was innovative she was only introduced to this through an elite institution and the opportunities it provided for international travel. Whilst making a documentary around 1990, Mieke sensed that technology could be a game-changer for education, even before most homes for example had dial-up internet and online learning was not a fully formed concept. Mieke quickly 'set up [her] own company' in this area because despite not having a 'clue' about technology she had 'this sort of confidence that had come through my parents, and you know headteacher'.[88] Recent research on elite girls' education in Britain has argued that instilling 'confidence' has been an increasingly important part of these schools' mission.[89] The term confidence in fact often appears in the elite girls' schools marketing material.[90]

Then, in the early 2000s and a result of this firm she created, Mieke met a man who was setting up his own firm in this area, and he offered her a role there. Mieke described it as the 'right place at the right time and this is what's so hard to say to people that you know you can't construct that'.[91] In this role she met people who 'had the ear of the government' and she became influential in policy advising the New Labour government on education and technology. She repeated a motif of innovation through a kind of happenstance throughout discussion of her career:

> I love playing with new ideas, new ways of putting people together, putting different disciplines together … *I always refer to innovation as like a contact sport*, I love the way you can put pieces together in different ways, and that's been, I don't know, it's always been in me so I love organisations that aren't just sort of fixed and rigid and reformed … it's the start-up that really excites me.[92]

Abigail shared this sense of confidence and excitement at working on something from the ground up—especially if it intertwines with the right historical moment.[93] Towards the end of the MBA at an elite American business school in the early 1990s, she was asked by her professor to join him in Russia for the summer because he was 'going to set up one of the first stock exchanges' there in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. She agreed to do it because it was 'exciting' and due to her elite schooling, she had learned some basic Russian. Abigail enjoyed her time there so much that she decided to stay and she got a job working for the World Bank 'advising the Russian government on its economic reforms'.[94] She was still in her early twenties but she felt confident in her position, explaining that: 'it was just this kind of incredible time when nobody knew any answers and so I didn't feel like you kind of needed experience in a way to be able to answer things, you just needed to kind of be smart and in a way not scared of the new'.[95] These women had the confidence and the agility to be one step ahead but they also had access to the spaces where it was possible to gain the knowledge and connections to understand where things were heading.

Privilege and discrimination

Women accepted that they had been successful but despite this many women continued to define themselves as remaining in a stratum of the middle class. Upper middle class tended to be the upper limit of where these women placed themselves. Some women even saw themselves as *downwardly* mobile which tends to be a particular preoccupation of the elite.[96] Victoria dramatically stated 'I've sunk miserably. Oh gosh, yes. Yes, I think materially, which matters more to [my parents], I've sunk without trace. And socially, probably similarly'.[97] Women in the older cohort often highlighted a discrepancy between social status and income. Sally said the combination of an '[elite] school and [Oxbridge] puts me very fairly and squarely in the middle class, maybe upper middle class, I'm not sure. I mean income wise, (pause) I'm probably about the same level as my parents were' who had a complicated class background.[98] Similarly, Patricia said that in class terms 'academics are a bit sort of odd anyway, you know, the classic line about upper middle-class tastes on lower middle-class incomes?'[99] There was a bit more familiarity amongst the older cohort with using the terminology of class.[100] Karen noted that she 'would like to say I stand outside class, but maybe nobody does'.[101] Others such as Judith and Mieke offered a description of their class using markers such as professions and family relationships without ever actually naming their own class position. After Judith gave her answer without offering a class bracket, I asked 'do you think that is upper middle class?' and she responded 'Yeah, I plead guilty to that one'.[102] For her, the elite were an *other*, they exist but she is 'not quite sure who they are . . . perhaps the aristocracy and the gentry'. For Karen, the elite in the twenty-first century are 'the Tory Party. The Royal family. And, you know, dependent aristocracy. Anyone who's ever been handed a powerful position without having to work for it. And that's usually handed down through these families'.[103] In an important sense eliteness is not being defined by occupation here but rather as an inherent quality of a person.[104]

This is not to say that women did not acknowledge the privileged nature of their upbringings and life experiences. Women in the older cohort tended to use the concept of 'luck' to explain their success. Celia epitomised this when she stated: 'I think I was very

lucky because of my background . . . I do come from an intellectual aristocracy in a way. . .. So, I was very lucky . . . and I didn't realise how lucky I was'.[105] Whereas the younger cohort were more likely to emphasise privilege and to engage in recent discourses of 'checking' privilege.[106] Alison referred to both the school she attended and her home experience as 'very privileged' and explained this meant that sometimes 'I've got to check my privilege'.[107] Fiona was particularly attuned to the role that her background and elite education played in driving her occupational success. She described there being 'massive elitism' at the Bar and explains that she does not 'believe for a minute I'd have got in if hadn't been to Oxbridge'.[108] Fiona illustrated this with a story about missing her A-Level exams due to glandular fever and getting 'shameful' results when she sat them late. She said that in each interview she would be asked '"what happened with your A-Levels?"' and she thinks that she would not have even got her foot in the door 'if I hadn't got the other stuff'.

The racialised privilege that many women had in these spaces was also discussed in some of the interviews, particularly those with the younger cohort of women. Fiona explicitly stated that it was not only class but whiteness that she was benefitting from: 'you know frankly, I am almost the middle-class white man, aren't I? A crippled white man. So, I think if I hadn't had that, I would have got nowhere'.[109] This invocation of whiteness is unusual, but the neoliberal discourse of 'diversity' emerges often, primarily in the context that 'diversity' has improved for women but that there is a long way to go on 'minorities'.[110] Rima Saini has argued that the British South Asian middle class do not experience class status in the same way as their white counterparts.[111] The role of race and how it intersects with experiences of class is exemplified by Andrea's experience. Despite Andrea's father hailing from an elite Indian family which had illustrious lineage in law, and the fact that she received an elite girls' school education, she faced overt discrimination. In the late 1970s, she was offered tenancy at a prestigious chambers over the phone, but when she went in the following day to meet the head of chambers, he realised that she was Indian, and 'started to give a convoluted ridiculous story about how overnight, after he'd phoned me, the junior tenants had come to him and told him that they didn't need another tenant'.[112] The double discrimination Andrea was facing as a woman of colour was making it very difficult for her to find a tenancy and she was in a 'dark place' even considering leaving the law. She decided to start applying to sets of chambers 'with more diversity in them' and soon the non-white head of one of these chambers 'gave me the greatest break in my life'.[113] She stated that 'I became more successful much more quickly than my colleagues who stayed in the traditional sets' and she was given the space to 'build my own case background'.[114] Although more diverse in terms of race, she was the only woman in this set when she started in 1980 and this did lead to issues when she got pregnant. Andrea was able to find chambers that were founded by people of colour but that did not mean it was easy there for women. We need to stay attuned to these intersections of experience.

Women did not have an equivalent 'old boys' network' that operated in exactly the same way as their male counterparts.[115] The elite schools they attended did not tap into a network of old girls who would offer them job opportunities simply by virtue of their shared education. Oxbridge seems to have been more significant leverage within their careers. In contrast, the role of Oxbridge networks in aiding women in the workplace is largely absent in accounts of earlier periods. As Howarth noted, women

students lamented that the 'old girls' network' did so much less for them in their career than the 'old boys' network'.[116] Sally managed to find the publisher for her first novel partly through her university connections. The editor who picked up the novel had actually been 'one or two years younger than me at [Oxbridge]' and he knew her 'writing and performing' from those days.[117] She said this was not the only reason he approved it but it 'probably helped … [Oxbridge] did me a huge number of favours'.[118] The women did benefit from connections. There were so many examples of women getting new jobs and opportunities simply by being told about the job. This can be literally being offered the job or it can be being introduced to an unknown opportunity or person recruiting—that then often prioritises them. There was occasionally a small moment of surprise or recognition when this is teased out in the interview.

Despite these challenges, there was little discussion of formal women's networks for their own career advancement amongst the interviewees. In the older cohort, women who attended Oxbridge prior to the advent of mixed colleges, praise the pastoral and intellectual support from women fellows who were 'extraordinary, just completely brilliant'.[119] They offered an academic role model for young women to emulate in these elite institutions. Sally was the only interviewee to discuss doing something as a group to consciously counteract the male dominance that was blocking their trajectory. She said that her and other up-and-coming female fiction writers would 'talk about work together … We saw it very much that there was … a wodge of males who were taking up all the oxygen and that, you know, we needed to do something about that'.[120] McCarthy has suggested that corporate women's networks really took off in the late 1980s and 1990s when women in the younger cohort were building their careers.[121] It's notable therefore that it was not a strong theme within the interviews. Across the cohorts there were few women who recalled having formal mentoring during their careers and framed it more as a 'sink or swim' situation. Karen explained that 'there was no sort of official mentoring system back then, and I wish there had been … There was just this sort of good old favouritism stuff that went on, I mean in television especially that was related to what you looked like'.[122] There was some unofficial—and contingent—support from more senior women who were prepared to give you discreet one-to-one advice, or more likely a man who had decided to support women in the workplace or took a shine to you who helped with career strategy.[123]

There was a paradox of having to rely on the same people that harass you in an educational or employment setting which was shared by many women across the cohorts. Janet had to contend with sexual harassment from her male graduate supervisor which undermined her intellectual confidence. She recalled one incident in a supervision in the late 1960s when they had had a:

> terrific conversation and I thought, oh, he's hearing me [laughs]. [Pause] I was there for a couple of hours, I remember, and then I said I've gotta go now, got up to leave the room, and he went the other way round the sofa and grabbed me on the way out. And I said, I said, ger off! And he said that's no way to talk to the [named chair] professor. I thought what?!. . .In retrospect, I don't think I ever really realized, for ages, how harmful that was. 'Cause I just thought, oh God, oh, I thought I thought I was interesting? Oh shit, I wasn't interesting at all. It's, you know, it's just that I wear a short skirt or whatever. [pause] And I, and I'm, that stayed with me for a long, long time.[124]

An interviewee from the younger cohort experienced grooming by a male teacher in sixth form.[125] The relationship was 'utterly, utterly, unequal and completely inappropriate' and it did turn sexual once she reached 18 years old. The interviewee said that her feelings about it are complicated because she finds the relationship difficult to process even now but also thinks meeting him changed the course of her life 'by opening me up to a whole new world' and putting her on the career path she has been so successful on. Caroline explained that as a woman you had to learn to 'work though' sexism because 'people making passes at you was a part of life and you put up it with it, you *certainly* didn't complain about it'.[126] Although she did 'resent' that some of her male colleagues were 'paid double' her salary and if she queried it she was brushed off with 'well they do a slightly different job'.[127] Karen, who worked in journalism, also stated that you 'had to get used to quite early on to just the general sexism and brashness and looseness of a lot of male journalists ... the newsroom was just a cesspit really, horrible drunk old geezers'.[128] Karen adopted a persona that she hoped would 'scare people' so that she could avoid the extreme things such as 'groping', although she still suffered from certain 'humiliations' such as always having to do to the 'little light story at the end, and it was always about Prince William who was a baby then. I had to write this stupid fucking Royal baby story- and I mean I'm totally Republican anyway!'[129] Fiona experienced an immense amount of sexual discrimination during her career as a barrister. She outlined incidents from unwanted kisses; to constant lewd jokes; to being belittled even in front of her juniors by male staff. Fiona even vividly described an incident that had taken place only a few days before the interview. What was particularly striking about her testimony was the ways in which she described the men who did these things as *'nice'* repeatedly because they were also often the same men Fiona who helped her with a new position, promotions or a good word to get the clerks to send her decent cases.

Discrimination was also experienced across the cohorts in relation to childbearing despite the fact landmark legislation was passed in 1975 which finally enshrined maternity rights in law.[130] The Employment Protection Act introduced statutory maternity pay for 14 weeks and limited job protection during maternity leave. Andrea took only 2 months off for each child when she gave birth in the late 1980s. She noted that maternity leave still did not feel 'official' during that time in the Law profession.[131] Melanie similarly took only a short amount of time off and even began to time her pregnancies so that the birth would fall near Christmas time to extend her leave without officially adding more maternity leave. The ideal during this historical moment was total compartmentalisation between work and home life in the high-flying professions but this manifested in different ways across the period.

For the older cohort, this was about stepping back from the labour market when the children were very young, and then perhaps going part time. There was no obligation for jobs to be held open, and you had to re-establish yourself—often in a new workplace—when you returned.[132] For the younger cohort, this meant taking a very short period of leave and then going back and not discussing the new experiences, acting completely as if life was continuing as normal. Barbara Mills, a QC born in 1940, explained to the writer Valerie Grove that, like many women of her generation she married in her early twenties. She did not take on a full-time role after getting pregnant during her Bar exam period and had a second child in quick succession. She stated that when she returned to the law, she had to take the approach that 'you switch right out of home gear. You just don't think

about it'.[133] In early 1997, Nicola Horlick, born in 1960, had found herself at the centre of a scandal when she was suspended as managing director of the UK pension fund business at Morgan Grenfell. Later that year she wrote an infamous book: *Can you have it all? How to succeed in a man's world*.[134] This book is much more ambiguous about whether women really can 'have it all' than it is often portrayed, Nicola stated when she got pregnant 'she dreaded breaking the news' to her employer and that 'it did not seem viable to stop working and then try and get back in several years down the line'.[135] As soon as she was pregnant her finance firm made the presumption that it would mean a slow but inevitable deflation of her career. She worked extra hard to prove to them she was as committed as ever: even working through her short maternity leave from home and working half-days when her child was extremely ill in hospital.[136]

Even this short time away could leave women vulnerable in a myriad of ways in their career. Laura stated that with each child she 'would work until the day I gave birth, then have 12 weeks off'.[137] It was clear that, at her city firm, '*if* you did take time off, or in any way appeared to prioritise your children or home, then there was a cost to you in terms of promotion prospects, and financial prospects'. Indeed, when Laura returned, she found out that she had been 'penalised' in the latest pay round and would not be getting a bonus because she'd 'been away'. Although, tellingly, she did not stand for this because she 'judged it to be a huge injustice' and . . . 'therefore, I did march up to whoever the man in charge was and made my case that this was totally unreasonable. And they backed off and gave me a modest . . . bonus'.[138] More seriously, Melanie lost out on a promotion while she was away because her boss had been replaced by another man. This led to ongoing tensions at work with her new boss, who perceived her as a threat and tried to get rid of her.[139] Andrea's chambers also saw a regime change while she was away which left her in a much less powerful position,[140] prompting her to take the unusual step (in the 1980s) of setting up her own chambers. It is important to acknowledge both the misogyny in these experiences and the class confidence which enabled these women from elite schools to challenge the unfairness and take risks to improve their positions.

Class privilege was also at play in the ways that women of this cohort were able to sustain their work and personal life through 'classed care chains, that is, outsourcing (some) care responsibilities to working-class women'.[141] The Nanny becomes a much more significant figure in the life histories of elite women born in the later cohort. Alexandra, born in the 1940s, explained that when she had live in help with the children that this was 'unusual' in her area.[142] She stated that 'there was a sort of backlash . . . all the mums around here were . . . grinning and bearing it and looking after the children all day long'.[143] Whereas Fiona from the younger cohort, a barrister, stated 'I had a nanny, and . . . I paid for the nanny'.[144] This implication that the nanny was the woman's responsibility was echoed in Caroline's statement that her husband 'absolutely treated me as an equal . . . yeah, absolutely we shared everything . . . we had a nanny and I regarded my job as *paying for the nanny*.'[145] And when her work was exceptionally busy during breaking news events she still had to find a neighbour to 'fill in the evenings and things like that' because her husband 'refused to have a live-in nanny, which would have made life easier'.[146] What is striking amongst this cohort of woman is that they frequently use the language of 'equality' and 'shared' to talk about the dynamic of the caring roles in their relationships, yet the organisational labour of making this happen still falls on the women.[147] Andrea's choice of words, starting with the standard formulation and then

moving to an honest assessment sums up the contradiction in many women's discussion of the dynamics: 'well, we sort of shared childcare, *but actually not*, we had nannies and au pairs'.[148] For these women reaching the occupational elite, they are more likely to be in a high-powered career from a younger age. They do not seem to have to move around for their husband's (or partner's) career in the midst of their own career same way as the older cohort, the husband's career is not just *assumed* the priority. However, in terms of caring responsibilities the relationships remain far from equal—the men are not contorting themselves to ensure the success of their pioneering wives.

Conclusion

Since the mid-twentieth century, a route through elite education and into occupational success has been increasingly important for women entering and maintaining their position within the elite. This piece has conceptualised women born between the early-1940s and mid-1950s as one cohort of elite women, with those born just a little later—the mid-1950s to the late-1960s—as having a different experience of being an occupationally successful elite woman. The pace of change was rapid, both socially and economically, for women more broadly in the later twentiethcentury and this affected the shape of elite trajectories. For the earlier cohort, they had more interrupted trajectories with marriage occurring often before they had established their careers and then the heights of their occupational success coming later in life. The elite education they received gave them mixed messages about ambition for those they perceived as the brightest, but often still within the bounds of public sector careers with a more feminine lineage. Marriage was important for the older cohort: they were in partnerships with other successful men in *Who's Who* in greater numbers than either earlier or later cohorts. Perhaps counterintuitively, this may have helped them stay in the realm of the elite whilst stepping away from the labour market during childbearing years.

The later cohort begin to have more linear careers that share more characteristics with the classic male conception of a career—they are clear that their employment trajectory *is* a career. The elite girls' schools set out a framework of achievement and competition from the beginning, communicating to these students that it was possible for women to balance motherhood and high-flying careers—although they did not do so in a way that acknowledged the difficulties or the ways in which managing the two aspects should not necessarily be an individual responsibility. This later cohort of elite women were more likely to enter careers in the 'male bastions' of the City and the Inns of Court during the financialisation of the economy and were more able to follow in the career footsteps of their fathers. Many already had more experiences of being in these male spaces from being able to attend 'daddy's college' at Oxbridge. In these workplaces there had to be a high degree of compartmentalisation and maternity leave was often only a few short weeks. Their partners did not assume that the woman's career in the relationship was secondary, for example we see far less occurrences of women moving around for her husband's job, but there is also not a lot done to make her career the priority. Organising childcare seemed to fall on the woman even when her career was more prestigious than her partner's. This raises an interesting question about 'progress' in relation to

elite women's experience of negotiating motherhood alongside a successful career. They are the 'having it all' cohort, but it seems that they needed to figure out how to do this themselves and to do so in a way that did not create a big fuss for their partners or employers.

Both cohorts share the contradictory experience of privilege and discrimination during their careers. In order to be highly occupationally successful, across the cohorts, women needed to be agile, and ahead of the curve in finding their 'niche'. This niche often intersected with change in the economy or the wider historical moment. Yet, being able to identify this and being in the space to make this happen involved having a degree of access in the first place through elite education, for example, or family connections. Women downplay their privilege to an extent although they do show some awareness of where they benefitted in terms of social and cultural capital, and even occasionally in terms of the privilege of whiteness many of them experienced. They do often demur from wanting to classify their social status in class terms, and we can see how eliteness is not a term that these women want to claim. Upper middle class is the limits of where they place themselves in the class structure: this positioning does important work in balancing the privileges they acknowledge and the sense that they still feel as though they operate within the routine bounds of society. This class positioning may be particularly likely by elite women—the perpetual *almost*—who continued to experience discrimination across the period, and which in some ways even intensified for the younger cohort because of their increased entry into male spaces. It is striking that sexist discrimination is a phenomenon that is hard to shake even for these women with elite educations and at the top of their professions.

Notes

1. See for example W.D Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1981); David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (London, 1990).
2. Mike Savage. "Introduction to elites: From the 'problematic of the proletariat' to class analysis of wealth elites." *The Sociological Review* 63, (2015): 233–234.
3. Bruno Cousin, Shamus Khan and Ashley Mears. "Theoretical and Methodological Pathways for Research on Elites." *Socio-Economic Review* 16, no. 2 (2018): 225–249.
4. Luna Glucksberg, "A Gendered Ethnography of Elites." *Focaal* 81, (2018): 16–28.
5. This focus on elite women who are not employed is also analysed in Laura Clancy and Hannah Yelin. "Introduction to Special Issue: Race, Royalty and Meghan Markle: Elites, Inequalities and A Woman in the Public Eye." *Women's Studies International Forum* 84, (2021).
6. Helen McCarthy. "Women, Marriage and Work in the British Diplomatic Service." *Women's History Review* 23, no. 6 (2014): 853–873.
7. Figures calculated by the 'Changing Elites' project, University of Oxford.
8. Ibid.
9. See for example Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London, 2020); Eve Worth and Laura Paterson, "'How is she going to manage with the children?' Organizational Labour, Working and Mothering in Britain, c.1960–90." *Past and Present*, Supplement 15, (2020): 318–343; Dolly Smith Wilson. "A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain." *Twentieth Century British History* 17, no. 2 (2006): 206–229.

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12. Eve Worth, Aaron Reeves and Sam Friedman, "Is there an Old Girls' Network? Girls' Schools and Recruitment to the British Elite." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 44, no. 1 (2023): 1–25.
13. Worth et al. "Is there an Old Girls' Network?".
14. Lynn Abrams. "Liberating the Female Self: Epiphanies, Conflict and Coherence in the Life Stories of Postwar British Women." *Social History* 39, no. 1 (2014): 14–35; Worth, *The Welfare State Generation*.
15. Mike Savage and Magne Flemmen. "Life Narratives and Personal Identity: The End of Linear Mobility?." 16, no. 1 (2019): 98; see also Jane Elliott, 'Talkin bout my generation: Perceptions of Generational Belonging Amongst the 1958 Cohort." *Sociological Research Online* 18, no. 4 (2013).
16. Interview with Elise.
17. Interview with Alexandra.
18. Interview with Rebecca.
19. Interview with Karen.
20. Interview with Sarah.
21. Interview with Janet.
22. Interview with Elise.
23. Interview with Fiona.
24. There was a strong flow of migration of white British subjects to colonial territories in this period, Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Cornell, 1997), 25; Interview with Mieke.
25. Interview with Judith.
26. Interview with Caroline.
27. Interview with Andrea.
28. Ysenda Maxstone Graham, *Terms and Conditions: Life in Girls' Boarding Schools c.1939–79* (London, 2017), 266.
29. Interview with Sally.
30. Interview with Patricia.
31. Interview with Victoria.
32. Ibid.
33. Interview with Alison.
34. Interview with Sarah.
35. Ibid.
36. Interview with Alison.
37. Interview with Fiona.
38. Int Interview with Alison.
39. Janet Howarth, 'Women' in Brian Harrison, *The History of the University of Oxford: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1994), 345.
40. Carol Dyhouse, "Troubled Identities: Gender and Status in the History of the Mixed College in English Universities since 1945." *Women's History Review* 12, no. 2 (2003): 174.
41. We are indebted to conversations with Janet Howarth for this insight.
42. Interview with Melanie.
43. Interview with Fiona.
44. Interview with Abigail.
45. Howarth, 'Women', 353.
46. Interview with Janet.
47. Interview with Alexandra.
48. Interview with Melanie.
49. Ibid.

50. Interview with Patricia.
51. Interview with Laura.
52. Helen Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation: Women's Work in the Civil Service and the London County Council* (Manchester, 2016).
53. Worth et al, 'Is there an Old Girls' Network?', 11.
54. See for example Interview with Caroline.
55. Rhona Rappoport and Robert Rappoport. "The Dual Career Family: A Variant Pattern and Social Change." *Human Relations*, 22, no. 1 (1969): 3–30.
56. See Worth, *The Welfare State Generation*; Abrams 'Liberating the Female Self'.
57. Interview with Celia.
58. Ibid.
59. Interview with Alexandra.
60. Interview with Victoria.
61. Ibid.
62. Interview with Elise.
63. He does not have an entry in *Who's Who*.
64. These figures are calculated by the 'Changing Elites project', University of Oxford.
65. Worth, *The Welfare State Generation*.
66. Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800–1867* (Oxford, 2007).
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68. Interview with Sally.
69. Interview with Georgina.
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71. Interviews with Alexandra and Penelope.
72. Hansard Society Commission, *Report on Women at the Top* (London, 1990).
73. Linda McDowell, *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City* (Oxford, 1997), 128.
74. Emma Barrett. "King Kaz: Cazenove, Thatcherism, and the 1980s Financial Revolution." *Twentieth Century British History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 108–131.
75. Interview with Laura.
76. Hansard Society Commission, *Women at the Top*, 47 (notable that 33% of people qualifying as barristers were women); Frances Burton, 'Foundation of the Association of Women's Barristers, 1991', in Erika Rackley and Rosemary Auchmuty (eds), *Women's Legal Landmarks: Celebrating the History of Women in Law in the UK and Ireland* (Oxford, 2019), 435–40.
77. Conversation with Ex-Principal, Oct 2021.
78. Erzsebet Bukodi, *Education, First Occupation and Later Occupational Attainment: Cross-cohort Changes among Men and Women in Britain* (London, 2009).
79. Office of Public Service and Science, *Equal Opportunities for Women in the Civil Service: Progress Report 1992–93* (HMSO, 1993), 4.
80. Interview with Sarah.
81. Interview with Laura.
82. See Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006).
83. Interview with Celia.
84. Interview with Janet.
85. Interview with Elise.
86. Interview with Sarah.
87. Ibid.
88. Interview with Mieke.
89. Alexandra Allan and Claire Charles. "Cosmo Girls: Configurations of Class and Gender in Elite Educational Settings." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 35, no. 3 (2014): 339.
90. Allan and Charles, "Cosmo Girls," 339.
91. Interview with Mieke.
92. Ibid.

93. Interview with Abigail.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
96. See for example Jessi Streib, *Privilege Lost: Who Leaves the Upper Middle Class and How They Fall in All Places* (Oxford, 2020).
97. Interview with Victoria.
98. Interview with Sally.
99. Interview with Patricia.
100. Worth, *The Welfare State Generation.*
101. Interview with Karen.
102. Interview with Judith.
103. Interview with Karen.
104. For recent research about the desire to 'deflect privilege' even for those with less 'elite' experiences see Sam Friedman, Dave O'Brien and Ian McDonald. "Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self." *Sociology* (2021): 1–18.
105. Interview with Celia.
106. Interview with Sarah.
107. Interview with Alison.
108. Interview with Fiona.
109. Ibid. Please note that 'crippled' as a concept has been reclaimed and used as an analytical tool in the development of 'crip theory'. See Dan Goodley, "Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies." *Disability and Society* 28, no. 5 (2013): 631–644.
110. See for example Interviews with Caroline and Laura.
111. Rima Saini. "The Racialised 'Second Existence' of Class: Class Identification and (De/Re-) construction across the British South Asian Middle Classes." *Cultural Sociology* 52, no. 4 (2023): 671–687.
112. Interview with Andrea.
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid.
115. For discussion of the significance of the Old Boys' Network see Aaron Reeves, Sam Friedman, Charles Rahal and Magne Flemmen. "The Decline and Persistence of the Old Boy: Private Schools and Elite Recruitment 1897–2016," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 6 (2017): 1139–1166.
116. Howarth, 'Women'.
117. Interview with Sally.
118. Ibid.
119. Interview with Janet.
120. Interview with Sally.
121. Helen McCarthy, *Girlfriends in High Places: How Women's Networks are Changing the Workplace* (Demos, 2004).
122. Interview with Karen.
123. See for example Interview with Judith.
124. Interview with Celia.
125. We are not going to identify the interviewee.
126. Interview with Caroline.
127. Ibid.
128. Interview with Karen.
129. Ibid.
130. Sara Connolly and Mary Gregory, 'Women and Work since 1970', in Nicholas Crafts, Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell (eds.), *Work and Pay in 20th Century Britain* (Oxford, 2007), 151.
131. Interview with Andrea.
132. Valerie Grove, *The Compleat Woman: Marriage, Motherhood, Career—Can She Have It All?* (London, 1988), 132.
133. Grove, *Compleat Woman*, 133.

134. Nicola Horlick, *Can You Have It All? How to Succeed in a Man's World* (Macmillan, 1997).
135. Horlick, *Can You Have it All?*, 116.
136. Horlick, *Can You Have it All?*, 129
137. Interview with Laura.
138. Ibid.
139. Interview with Melanie.
140. Interview with Andrea.
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142. Interview with Alexandra.
143. Ibid.
144. Interview with Fiona.
145. Interview with Caroline.
146. Ibid.
147. Worth and Paterson. "Organisational Labour"; see also Angela Davis and Laura King. "Gendered Perspectives on Men's Changing Familial Roles in Postwar England, c.1950–1990." *Gender and History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 87.
148. Interview with Andrea.

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Appendix 1: Interviewee DOB and profession

Interviewee Pseudonym	DOB	Primary Profession
Cohort One		
Janet	1948	Academic
Georgina	1943	Business
Elise	1942	Academic
Celia	1946	Academic/Writer
Patricia	1946	Academic
Victoria	1949	Artist
Rebecca	1954	Culture
Alexandra	1945	Architect
Penelope	1953	Vet
Sally	1952	Writer
Cohort Two		
Judith	1957	Academic
Karen	1959	Writer/Journalist
Andrea	1957	Barrister
Melanie	1960	Finance
Caroline	1956	Broadcast journalist
Mieke	1966	Media/Business
Laura	1961	Finance
Fiona	1960	Barrister
Alison	1964	Academic/Artist
Abigail	1967	Public intellectual
Sarah	1963	Civil Servant